INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

Situation Report of Afghanistan

July 2001

Introduction

Thirteen years have passed since troops from the Soviet Union pulled out of Afghanistan, ending their disastrous decade-long occupation and war with the entrenched *mujaheddin*, which displaced millions and destroyed most of the country's infrastructure and economy. Sadly, the legacy of the *jihad* has not faded. War and political instability have persisted, and Afghanistan's situation has further deteriorated since the withdrawal.

Today, most of Afghanistan is in ruins. Widespread and intense civil war during the 1990's destroyed many areas that had remained intact during the occupation; and isolated conflicts in the current decade have continued to take their toll. At the same time, widespread human rights abuses, poor governance, and economic and political isolation have added to the country's ills. To make matters still worse, Afghanistan is now coping with a devastating countrywide drought, now in its third year, which has led to huge new population displacements both within and outside the country.

I. Basic Conditions

The Humanitarian Situation

Some background facts about Afghanistan from the United Nations:

- An estimated 25 percent of Afghan children die before the age of five.
- The average life expectancy in Afghanistan is 46 years.
- 42 percent of all deaths in Afghanistan occur because of preventable diarrhoeal diseases.[2]

Obviously, the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is grave. Main causes are inadequate food and water sources (on account of the drought, destroyed infrastructures, and a stagnant economic system), lack of proper health care, and ongoing fighting and persecution, which make it difficult for humanitarian agencies to remedy problem areas.

The Complexity of the Situation

The humanitarian situation throughout Afghanistan is not uniform. Most parts of the country are suffering from the drought, but the effects are felt differently from place to place. Some areas are severely affected by ongoing military activity and persecution by Taliban and anti-Taliban forces, while others areas are not. Generally, economic activity in most areas of Afghanistan is minimal: rudimentary market systems are in place for basic items in some places, but in some areas economic opportunities are completely non-existent. In short, it is difficult to make generalizations about conditions in Afghanistan. To describe humanitarian needs in real detail it is necessary to describe areas region by region, district by district, and even village by village.

---

[2] 2001 and 1999 UN Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeals for Afghanistan, United Nations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, available on the Internet at http://www.reliefweb.int/w/Rwb.nsf

Water
Water availability differs widely across the country. Some areas –for instance, mountainous regions in the west and north– are totally dependent on rain year-round: crops are rain-fed, and water for washing and consumption are taken from rain-fed reservoirs dug into low areas and fed by catchment "gutter" ditches, running along the bases of mountainsides. In other places, water for both agriculture and personal use is supplied by irrigation canals diverted from rivers, running hundreds of kilometers into desert areas. (Underground kareez canals are dug in some desert areas, linking various water sources (wells or springs). In still other places, water for both irrigation and household use is taken from springs and spring-fed ponds. Many cities and large villages lie on rivers and have more abundant sources of water.

Effected Areas
Areas hardest hit by drought have been mountain villages with poor reservoir systems and desert regions at the far ends of irrigation systems. In these places, agricultural activity has essentially ceased: no water is available, no crops are growing and no agricultural income is being produced. Farmlands have become deserts, and the scarce existing livestock eat desert plans and small shrubs. Displacement is high, while those remaining are selling off resources and transporting water and food from distant areas. (In some areas, wells supply small amounts of salty water for a few remaining families who use the water out of desperation.)

Even in areas with limited water availability (e.g., in certain cities in the north and in southeastern areas), water shortages have led to sharply decreased agricultural activity, as farmers have chosen to use what water exists to irrigate small portions of land. Food availability remains a problem, and incomes have been severely cut. Households have also had to deal with increasing numbers of IDPs from other areas, who have come to use the limited water that is available in these areas.

In mountain and irrigation-fed desert areas, the simple need of drinking water has become acute: families now struggle just to transport water from other villages, or to raise resources to buy water from transporters.

In hard-hit drought areas, some families with limited existing resources (livestock, textiles, past crop reserves, savings) have been able to persist by using their resources to buy food and water. Others have survived simply by begging from others, or by engaging in negligible income raising activities: collecting and drying sheep droppings to sell as a fuel source, or harvesting small desert plant seeds to sell as incense.

The War
To make matters worse for Afghans, military activity has continued over the last year in many areas in northern, central, and western Afghanistan. Aerial bombing and artillery bombardment have been reported in the northeast and in some central areas, while guerilla and counter-guerilla activities have been more common in the west. In some areas – e.g., Parwan, Bamiyan, Panshir – the fighting has been occurring for years.

In villages where military activities are chronic (e.g., in Ghor, Bamiyan, Jawzjan, Sar-e-Pul, Takhar, Badakhshan, and along the road north out of Kabul), life has become all but impossible, irrespective of drought conditions: ongoing fighting, bombing, and looting has led most villagers to leave. (In certain areas, the Taliban or anti-Taliban forces have instructed villagers to leave.)

Generally, the ongoing military activity throughout Afghanistan has seriously complicated Afghans' efforts to handle the drought. Infrastructures in many provinces (e.g., water systems) have been destroyed by warfare, making it extremely difficult for families to survive. Long term agricultural projects –orchards, for instance– have been destroyed, removing income sources. Infrastructure problems have also persisted because of the Taliban's inability to organize large-scale rehabilitation and development schemes.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)
Many Afghans have left their homes. Fearing warfare, looting, persecution or starvation, or believing that no real livelihood opportunities will exist for them in the future, many sell off all their resources – livestock, carpets, furniture, doorframes, windows – and move to urban areas like Mazar, Kabul, and Herat; to find work to assistance from friends or relatives. Still others find their way to Pakistan or Iran. Those with no resources sometimes leave their villages simply because they have run out of water or food. Such persons often go to the nearest village with a water source and try to find work, or they beg.

Herat city in the west has absorbed well over a quarter million IDPs into host families, and another 100,000 in camps around the city. Kabul, as in previous years, continues to host a large IDP population, its numbers unknown. NGOs in Mazar have registered over 15,000 vulnerable IDP families in the last 3 months – comprising almost 100,000 persons. Still other villages around Afghanistan are hosting hundreds of thousands of the displaced. Overall, UNOCHA estimates that over one million persons have been displaced within Afghanistan in the last year. Iran and Pakistan as well have absorbed well over 400,000 refugees in the same time period.

In northern areas (e.g., near Mazar, Takhar, Kunduz), the displacement crisis has been especially serious: families have moved to squalid makeshift camps with shelters built from torn cloth, plastic bags, and parts of old carpets. Populations have increased. Sanitary conditions are poor: occupants are defecating and urinating in open areas near their living quarters. At the same time, food availability is a problem. Many camp occupants live on bits of old bread begged from others, or have been forced to consume unhealthful and even dangerous items: old animal parts discarded by butchers, garbage, wild plants, even insects.

Generally, health conditions for the displaced are poor. Diarrhea and skin diseases have been common, and high mortality rates have been recorded (rates over 2 per 10,000 per month).

"The Snowball Effect"
In many instances, it has been observed that IDPs "drag down" host communities with them. In the north and west, families from rain-fed mountain areas and areas without canal water have settled by areas still fed by river or canal, thereby adding to overall resource depletion in the new areas of settlement and making life less sustainable. This situation seems to have caused larger displacements (IDPs *and* their hosts) to other areas – e.g., Mazar, Herat.

In many places in Afghanistan, the lines between IDP and host – between those with limited resources and those in real need – have become blurred. With both IDPs and families in their homes, it has been difficult to distinguish between those families possessing small capacities to survive (IDP or not) and those on the edge of being totally deprived. Many agencies have refrained from making distinctions, observing that the differences were negligible. IDPs, hosts, city residents, etc. have all blended together as one needy class.

Human Rights and Humanitarian Law in Afghanistan

The human rights situation in Afghanistan remains dismal. Since the Taliban effectively took power over most of the country in 1996, they have implemented a harsh religious regime incorporating an extreme interpretation of Islamic law with substantial proscriptions over mundane matters (prohibiting music and photography, and mandating men to have beards longer than the width of a hand) and disproportionate punishments for violations. The interpretations fall especially harshly on women: Taliban decrees state that females can no longer be educated beyond the elementary level, work in any professional position, or be seen in public without wearing a complete covering, called a *burqa* or *chadary*. The regime also has little tolerance for any form of dissent (terror methods are common, including even public display of murdered "traitors") and there is no notion that democratic rule has a place in national Taliban governance.

Taliban prohibitions have had their largest effect in cities, especially Kabul, where educated people, former government officials, and women have faced special scrutiny. The decrees prohibiting women from employment and restricting movement have been particularly dehumanizing: women are barred from occupations they have performed for years and are essentially housebound. Many are unable to help support their families. Taliban prohibitions have had a lesser effect in rural areas and outlying cities, but as noted below, forced military conscription and outright theft by authorities have still been reported in those areas.

On economic and social rights, the Taliban regime has been hopeless: the regime's resources have largely gone into fueling the conflict with anti-Taliban forces, and little regard has been paid to improving infrastructures to help Afghans earn livelihoods. The Taliban leadership on the national level has done little to alleviate needs, and in many places Taliban officials have interfered with international efforts to assist Afghans.

In their military activities, the Taliban army has violated articles of the Geneva Conventions pertaining to internal conflicts, by indiscriminately killing civilians and perpetrating rapes, theft and extortion.[3] Many civilian families have also had their younger male members forcibly conscripted into the army, without any form of process. Taliban forces have also violated customary humanitarian law and international criminal law, by executing prisoners of war and by committing genocide and crimes against humanity against civilians.[4]

Humanitarian law violations have also been committed by anti-Taliban forces, both against Taliban soldiers and Afghan civilians.[5] However, it bears remarking that the anti-Taliban leadership in Faizabad is markedly less harsh on general human rights restrictions –

---

[3] Artillery shelling and bombing of non-military targets – villages, agricultural warehouses, water infrastructure systems – are regularly reported within Afghanistan. Taliban forces have also fired upon and shelled civilians in "retaliation actions." Refugees in Pakistan have also reported extortion threats by Taliban forces, in which villages are told to "feed the troops" or face destruction.

[4] During this year, Taliban forces intentionally killed hundreds of civilians in Bamiyan province; in one case, massacring over 500 persons in a village, including 16 aid workers (Yakahlang). During battles in and around Mazar during 1998, Taliban forces executed thousands of prisoners of war; and, during retaliatory sweeps, killed over 3,000 civilians in Mazar city in two days (many of the dead were shot at close range, in the groin and head). As in Bamiyan this year, persons of the Hazara ethnicity were specially targeted for killing.

[5] E.g., forces associated with the anti-Talbian alliance killed thousands of Taliban prisoners of war in a remote desert area southwest of Mazar-i-Sharif in 1997.

especially vis-à-vis women – and they have a better record on cooperation with international humanitarian authorities.

The human rights situation in Afghanistan appears to have a role in causing and maintaining displacement. Recent surveys in Pakistan by IRC and the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children indicate that a substantial number of Afghan refugees fear that if they are deported to Afghanistan, they will face forced conscription, abduction of females, and extortion. Previous surveys of new refugees at Jalozai and Shamshatoo camps show that the majority of new refugees fear persecution within Afghanistan.

Notwithstanding all the above points, there is room for humanitarian agencies to operate. Many officials in the Taliban –especially on the local level– have cooperated well with international agencies on the ground to allow delivery of humanitarian assistance. Many Taliban officials have been allies to humanitarian aid groups in overcoming government resistance at higher levels. Local officials –better appreciating the humanitarian problems of their local population– have proved valuable partners in creating space for humanitarian projects and initiatives to allow activities otherwise prohibited by Taliban restrictions (e.g., home-schools for Afghan girls).

II. The IRC Response

Eastern Provinces. In provinces southeast and east of Kabul, IRC has continued to offer reintegration assistance to Afghan families, by implementing projects in agricultural assistance, income generation, health education, community development, and infrastructure rehabilitation. Many recipients are recent returnees, former refugees seeking to rebuild their homes, now struggling to cope with the ongoing drought. IRC's projects are helping to keep these families from becoming displaced again.

Western Provinces. In Herat, IRC is implementing emergency programming in Maslakh camp – constructing emergency latrines to improve health and sanitation levels, and running a 24 hour ambulance service to take emergency health cases to the hospital in Herat. In provinces near Herat – areas from which many of the displaced are leaving – IRC is implementing mitigation programming: agricultural assistance and food aid programs targeted at keeping people in their homes.

Northern Provinces. IRC has recently opened an office in Mazar-i-Sharif, in the north of Afghanistan. In collaboration with a consortium of local organizations, IRC has constructed an emergency camp for new displacements – Sakhi camp – and is implementing shelter assistance, sanitation improvements, water supply systems, and food distribution programs. IRC's partners are also providing mobile health services and food distributions to displaced persons in other makeshift camps in and around Mazar. IRC also plans to begin mitigation programs in outlying rural areas: agricultural and food projects to secure potential displacement in the future.

As part of its general protection and assistance programming, IRC is working with the United Nations and other agencies to design an early warning system information system: a mechanism to collect and digest information from various agencies on displacement trends, humanitarian conditions, and protection concerns. IRC is also working with the Women's Commission on Refugee Women and Children to improve gender-awareness in programming, and to investigate protection issues relevant to vulnerable displaced females.

III. General Observations

Afghanistan's drought has created a massive humanitarian crisis. Food and water shortages are acute in many areas, especially the north. Mass displacement is occurring. Displaced Afghans in northern, western, and central Afghanistan are suffering from malnutrition and serious health problems. Displaced persons are living in unspeakable conditions, forced to consume filthy water and eat unwholesome and dangerous foodstuffs. In many places, mortality rates have surpassed emergency levels.[6] International agencies – IRC included – are responding, but the need is greater than existing capacities. *This cannot be considered a status quo situation. Despite ongoing interventions, Afghanistan is currently experiencing a humanitarian emergency on a mass scale.*

The civil war has exacerbated the effects of the drought. As noted above, the ongoing military activity throughout Afghanistan has seriously complicated Afghans' efforts to handle the drought. With many water-related infrastructures and economic systems destroyed by warfare, many Afghan families have found it difficult to deal with water and food shortages.

Widespread plans for repatriation of refugees are not feasible at this time. *Afghanistan remains a dangerous place for many Afghans.* Basic human rights protections do not exist. Young men are regularly conscripted into military service. Businesses suffer from extortion. Ethnic and sectarian minorities, educated or political persons, and women and girls often live in insecurity. Many Afghans in Pakistan and Iran remain what they were when they first fled: *refugees* – fleeing persecution and violence. In any case, regardless of their status, many Afghans cannot return to their homes on account of Afghanistan's massive humanitarian crisis. These are points that must be communicated to the governments of Iran and Pakistan, who are today seeking to return many Afghans to their homes.

Notwithstanding obvious concerns, cooperation with Taliban authorities can be productive. Despite their severe human rights record and seeming apathy toward humanitarian issues, Taliban authorities (especially on the local level) have shown willingness to cooperate with international authorities on humanitarian programming, as have officials in the anti-Taliban alliance in the northeast. Meaningful cooperative projects have been implemented in humanitarian areas, and successful programs have been completed, including initiatives to allow activities otherwise prohibited by Taliban restrictions. International actors must appreciate that engagement with authorities is possible and necessary, and can be productive.

Humanitarian aid is not a solution, merely a treatment. There is little that humanitarian aid can do to resolve the underlying causes of Afghanistan's crisis.

---

[6] In various northern provinces, IRC has found preliminary evidence of mortality rates among displaced persons in excess of 2 per 10,000 per day. Save the Children-USA has found rates above 5 per 10,000 per day in Faryab province. In Sakhi camp in Mazar, the rate was found to be almost 3 per 10,000 per day.

IV. Recommendations

Humanitarian aid funding to Afghanistan needs to be increased. Recent high level U.N. visits to the region – by Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the High Commissioner for Refugees, Ruud Lubbers – have led to increased humanitarian funding and staffing for Afghanistan, but *more must be provided.* Donor countries must respond more generously to the United Nations 2001 Inter-Agency Appeal for Afghanistan, so that humanitarian agencies can increase staffing and aid for crisis areas. The World Food Programme especially needs additional food and funds. Greater focus must also be placed on funding mitigation projects aimed at averting future displacement. (IRC is attempting to boost such programming – but funding is in short supply.) Assistance is further needed to strengthen existing communities, especially those absorbing the displaced. IRC has seen that assistance *can* stem out-migration and save vulnerable persons who lack the means to leave their homes. And targeted programming can enable some refugees and IDPs to return to their homes.

International squeamishness about long-term aid to Afghanistan must be overcome. While it is understandable that the international community is reluctant to offer longer-term development aid to Afghanistan because of concerns over human rights violations by controlling authorities, it must be stressed that it is possible for the donor community to increase funding for both emergency *and* longer-term infrastructure programs to help Afghans stay in their homes, *without aiding political forces.* (Many agencies, including IRC, have been engaged in this delicate task for years.) In any case, it should be noted that short-term funding for Afghanistan in most cases acts as nothing more than a "band-aid" (and an ineffective one at that). *More comprehensive funding is needed to address Afghanistan's numerous problems.* In responding to the United Nations Consolidated Appeal, donors must be prepared to complement short-term projects with funding for longer-term sectors like education and development.

International actors should understand the political context of Afghanistan's drought. *Drought displacement is not an exclusively natural phenomenon.* Certainly, the actual meteorological event of the drought is natural,[7] but the *effects* of the drought are linked with violations of humanitarian law and with the general human rights deficit in Afghanistan. Indeed, the drought's effects have been intensified by ongoing fighting and poor governance. IRC surveys and investigation have proved this. And insofar as the war and poor governance are political phenomena, the drought's effects should be thought of as manifestations of Afghan political decision-making. And insofar as many relevant international actors have had involvement in Afghanistan's political and military affairs in the past (and the present), they must recognize their obligations now to address the political realities of Afghanistan.[8]

Increased political will must be harnessed to seek resolutions to Afghanistan's war. Again, Afghanistan's problems have arisen in large part from ongoing conflict. International actors cannot hope to change the underlying humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan unless they make efforts to address Afghanistan's ongoing civil war. This is a point that should not be avoided or forgotten.

---

[7] Some environmentalists may disagree with this statement, but its use in this context should be clear.

[8] On this topic, note the recently released report by Human Rights Watch on regional nations' involvement in maintaining Afghanistan's conflict. Human Rights Watch, Afghanistan Report, July 13, 2001.

John — FYI

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE
PAKISTAN – AFGHANISTAN

Situation Report on Afghanistan[1]
July 2001

Introduction.................................1
I. Basic Conditions........................1
II. The IRC Response....................5
III. Observations...........................6
IV. Recommendations...................7

[1] Information in this report is taken from observations by IRC staff and staff from other humanitarian agencies, as well as reports by UN agencies and NGOs. IRC also received input from the Pakistan office of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children.